

NEWARK HOUSING CRISIS
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With a population of 335,000 of whom 200,000 are Black and 75,000 are of Hispanic, Portuguese or Brazilian origin, the City of Newark has no comprehensive plan to house a majority of its population. Neither the Mayor nor the City Council has adequate plans to shelter the homeless, to provide low-income families with affordable rental housing, to help low-income home owners with means to rehabilitate their homes and to improve the lot of the ill-housed in the City. The absence of adequate plans and programs for needy families and individuals in the poorest large city in America (U.S. Census of 1980) makes worse the already deteriorating condition of much public and private housing in many communities within Newark. According to a report about the status of Newark housing published by the New Jersey Department of Public Advocate in 1986, close to 80% of existing residential structures were built prior to 1940 and conversely only 5% of Newark's housing stock was constructed after 1970. Mass demolition of old structures, recent planned dynamiting of certain public housing structures and the lack of new housing units for purchase or rent by low-income families in recent years, have already resulted in there being only one new housing unit constructed for every three units demolished in the mid-1980's. If such a trend is allowed to continue, by 1990 as stated by the Public Advocate's Report there will be less than 100,000 housing units left for a projected total population of more than 300,000 at that time.

The report of the Department of Public Advocate concludes: "Because so many (housing) units have disappeared or deteriorated, many former occupants of decent and affordable housing are finding that no such units are available. (Today) large numbers of Newark residents are thus confined to life in deteriorating housing, often paying a disproportionate of their income for rent." The disappearance of affordable housing for low-income families has been a major factor in driving an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 such families into homelessness. Other contributing factors in the recent increase in the number of the homeless have been spiralling rent costs, demolition or forced abandonment of their apartments, family strife, untreated mental illness or unchecked alcohol or substance abuse.

In 1949 the U.S. Congress passed the Federal Housing Act for the purpose of guaranteeing "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family". In the early 1950's and for the same purpose, the Newark Housing Authority (NHA) was formed to provide adequate, safe, sanitary and affordable units to low-income families. With funds from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and some low-

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rise apartment complexes were built and soon occupied by eligible families. In recent years according to the New Jersey Reporter, however, NHA officials have refused to spend allocated HUD funds (\$123 million in 1986, for example), in adequate amounts for the proper maintenance of the complexes and the security of the occupants. NHA officials have systematically depopulated selected complexes, sealed up the doors and windows and then advocated the dynamiting of these complexes for lack of occupancy--which was a condition artificially created by the NHA officials themselves. With the approval of HUD and the City Council members (with one exception), four NHA complexes were dynamited this year and 17 more complexes are scheduled for destruction soon. If this destruction plan is carried out in full, 6,000 NHA housing units will be destroyed. Currently 11,000 families are on the NHA waiting list, and for the last several months and for the coming 12 months, the NHA is refusing to sign up new applicants. In the wake of the destruction of two complexes in May, the NHA claims to be building 437 low-rise townhouses throughout the City for rent to low-income families and plans to construct 225 similar units on lands made vacant by dynamiting of NHA high-rise complexes. The NHA also announced that it is now seeking additional monies to build 1,100 more townhouses sometime in its future.

Yet even if we accept the optimistic assumption of the NHA that a total of 1,752 townhouses units will be constructed and fully occupied sometime in the future, the fact remains that the NHA plans to destroy 6,000 housing units, has turned its back on 11,000 families on the NHA waiting list and shut the door on other low-income families seeking affordable rental housing in Newark.

Newark has had rent control since 1973, but even with rent control rents have increased 100% in the last ten years. The City Council weakened such controls last year by allowing partial vacancy decontrol and substantial rent increase for landlords.

Occupants of better apartments built by HUD funds (such as Georgia King Village) have received huge rent increases. The possibility exists that the buildings will be sold to private developers who will evict the present occupants and convert these structures into condominiums for future occupancy by higher income residents. Meanwhile spiralling rents in these structures have already forced many families to find scarce rental units elsewhere. Some have become homeless. Under such circumstances, we must conclude that the underlying but unstated housing policy of the ruling principalities and powers of Newark is to drive low-income families by one means or another out of the City.

Meanwhile the privation of low-income families is made worse by efforts of City Hall and the business community to entice private, for-profit developers to build high-cost houses and condominiums in designated areas for purchase prices ranging from

\$75,000 to \$250,000 or more. These entrepreneurs are given liberal tax abatements, protection from rent control and other enticements. They are currently restoring apartment and house structures in designated "blighted" areas, where once low-income families lived, into housing units to be occupied by more fortunate families and individuals. Though some developers have, agreed to provide 15% of these housing units for "moderate"-income families having a gross income not exceeding \$28,000 a year and to "low-income" families having a gross income not exceeding \$18,000 a year, this seemingly generous 15% provision will do little or nothing to help homeless, low-income or moderate-income families who because of their limited financial resources cannot afford to purchase such housing units but must find rental units instead.

The current housing crisis in Newark is made worse by the harsh policies of the Reagan Administration toward the urban poor. 50% of the increase in nation-wide poverty since 1981, states the Washington-based Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, can be directly attributed to sharp reductions in cash, food and housing benefits to low-income families in the last six years. On demand of the Administration and agreed to be an acquiescent Congress, the budget of the Department of Housing and Urban Development has been reduced from \$31 billion in 1981 to \$10 billion in 1986 and even less in 1987. This has caused big cuts in rent subsidies and the virtual cancellation of all plans to build new rental units for low-income families.

In recent weeks elected officials, business leaders and other citizens have claimed that the City of Newark is undergoing drastic renewal and a dramatic rebirth for the better. As evidence they point to the new downtown office buildings at the center of the City, the University Heights Master Plan to strengthen and expand four institutions of higher learning in the Central Ward, the prospect of a new mid-city art center similar to the Lincoln Center in New York City, skyrocketing house prices in sections of the North Ward, and the ground breaking last summer of a new \$2.9 million City Welfare Building.

But in a city where single individuals get a monthly welfare check of \$140, where the number of homeless families increases daily, and the Mayor and City Council have no adequate plan to improve the lot of the homeless and ill-housed and thousands of poor families vainly seek decent and affordable rental housing, our beloved city cannot undergo a lasting transformation if we allow it to become two cities--one for the rich and one for the poor. In the name of justice and equity, and in cooperation with concerned citizens, we must develop and set forth a housing platform which can gain popular support and will influence the policy decisions of our elected officials.